

'In Washington, Life Imitates Art'

By Sam Farr

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"Cool Hand Luke," that classic American film, offers one of the most memorable lines in cinema: "What we've got here is failure to communicate."

The prison captain who drawled those words toward Luke was offering a warning to other prisoners: the Captain's word is law, no backtalk allowed.

For better or worse, it provides a fitting image for the last few years in Washington. The decrees issued by the White House must be heeded without comment or criticism--or else.

The latest victim of the "failure to communicate" is Adm. William Fallon, who served in the Navy for more than 40 years with great honor, most recently as commander of U.S. Central Command in the Middle East. He spoke out against the administration's anti-Iran saber-rattling...and now he's gone.

His departure came on the heels of an article in Esquire painting the admiral as the lone soul standing between President Bush and war with Iran. This type of insubordination--or even simple questioning--just doesn't cut it with this White House, and now Fallon is gone.

It's fair to ask whether military officers should ever question the decisions of our civilian leadership. After all, a rigid hierarchy is there for a reason. But even if you ignore the fact that debate and discussion is always healthy, it's important to know that Adm. Fallon is only one of many Bush underlings sacrificed at the altar of single-mindedness.

Let's dial the calendar back to 2003, when the president was proposing a war of conquest against Iraq in order to subdue a cache of weapons of mass destruction. Weapons inspectors

who spent years in the country balked at the president's characterization. I spoke to inspectors from the Central Coast and was convinced that no such weapons existed. But the White House just couldn't believe that was so. And to war we went.

Fast forward a few years and look at the state of science in America. Media reports accusing the Bush administration of muzzling scientists peaked in 2004, when the Union of Concerned Scientists released its report, "Scientific Integrity in Policymaking: An Investigation into the Bush Administration's Misuse of Science." Since then, 15,000 scientists around the nation have joined the Restoring Scientific Integrity Network to help counter Bush administration policies. Bush's first surgeon general last year went so far as to accuse the president of political interference.

Unfortunately, the damage has already been done. The group's report couldn't be more clear: "There is a well-established pattern of suppression and distortion of scientific findings by high-ranking Bush administration political appointees across numerous federal agencies. These actions have consequences for human health, public safety, and community well-being."

Bringing us back to current day--and back to California--we see another fine example of Bush's style of leadership. In 2005, California applied for a waiver from the Environmental Protection Agency's rather lax vehicle emission rules, asking to set higher standards. Two years later, this past December, the EPA denied the request. Here's the kicker: media reports over the past few weeks have shown that EPA Administrator Stephen Johnson made this decision against the unanimous advice of his staff.

Speaking of the EPA, just last week the agency weakened its own standards on ozone after President Bush intervened in the process. He overruled EPA's decision, forcing the agency to set weaker limits. The Washington Post quoted John Walke, clean-air director at the Natural Resources Defense Council: "It is unprecedented and an unlawful act of political interference for the president personally to override a decision that the Clean Air Act leaves exclusively to EPA's expert scientific judgment."

It really begs the question why many of the president's agencies have any staff at all, considering so many decisions are made arbitrarily, based on political expediency rather than objective fact. Maybe they just need personnel to rewrite justifications of rulings, offering a thin veneer of legitimacy.

The president has done a splendid job in creating this "failure to communicate," but he's also rewriting an even older tale: The Emperor's New Clothes. The president seems utterly convinced that his edicts are wise beyond the comprehension of anyone but himself. It's high time that someone convince him that his fancy ideas are poised to crumble around him, that his finery is leading the nation down a dangerous path.